IMPROVING LIVES BY REFLECTING ON THE VERSES OF THE QUR'AN

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Introduction

Though an unlettered nation, when the Noble Qur'an came to the Arabs, they received it with attentive hearts. Before memorizing it, they first implemented it in their lives and their behaviors. This was in response to the Almighty's injunction: *Read*.[1] This thoughtful reading of the Qur'an bore fruit, entirely changing the lives of those first Muslims. The outcome was seen in their improved behavior, in outstanding human progress, and in their openness to the whole world in spite of their most basic tools of education and communication.[2]

Unfortunately, this level of reading, understanding and applying the teachings of the Qur'an in one's life could not be maintained. It started receding gradually due to multiple factors until it reached an unparalleled state

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[1] The Arabic word اقرأ (*iqra'*) which means 'read' or 'recite' is the first word of the Qur'an revealed to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (96:1).

[2] In a few years the Muslim nation became a superpower in all aspects. From Spain to China, great Muslim scientists and thinkers carried the torch of civilization when Europe was going through the Dark Ages. Muslims excelled at art, architecture, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, geography, chemistry and other sciences. Muslim scholars shared their knowledge with medieval Europe and this led to the Renaissance.

of (Qur'an) illiteracy. Despite the widespread use of printing and publishing means which facilitated the writing, reading and listening to the Qur'an, Muslims became disconnected from the Book of Allah in their day-to-day affairs. Many Muslims limited their engagement with the Qur'an to an occasional recitation and memorization of its words, focusing merely on the rules of recitation and the articulation of letters without any proper understanding or reflection on its meanings. Some only recite it to the sick who seek blessings and cure, to those dying and in funerals. What the Muslim nation is going through today – this backwardness, continuous defeats, inability to act, etc. – is a reflection, one way or another, of the way Muslim communities deal with the Book of Allah.

This book addresses Muslims with the aim of showing them how to mend their relationship with the Qur'an. The book highlights the reasons why many do not reflect upon the Qur'an or relate what they have read to their own lives. These reasons are mostly linked to the corruption of our senses and cognitive faculties. By fixing such problems, Muslims will be able to benefit from the Qur'an, allowing it to improve their lives.

Why We Read the Qur’an

Though there is great reward for the mere recitation of the Qur’an, the main purpose of revealing it, however, is for people to contemplate and reflect upon its verses. In chapter 38 of the Qur’an,[3] Allah – Most Exalted is He – says:

﴿كِتَٰبٌ أَنزَلْنَٰهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَٰرَكٌ لِّيَدَّبَّرُوٓا۟ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُو۟لُوا۟ ٱلْأَلْبَٰبِ ٢٩﴾

[This is] a blessed Book which We[4] have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], that they might reflect upon its verses and that those of understanding would be reminded. (38:29)

In chapter 4 of the Qur’an,[5] the Almighty says:

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[3] Surat Sad

[4] It is to be noted that the reference of Allah to Himself as “We” and “Us” in many verses of the Qur'an is necessarily understood in the Arabic language to denote grandeur and power. In the English language this is known as the *Royal We,* where a plural pronoun is used to refer to a single person holding a high office such as a monarch.

[5] Surat An-Nisa’

﴿أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَۚ وَلَوۡ كَانَ مِنۡ عِندِ غَيۡرِ ٱللَّهِ لَوَجَدُواْ فِيهِ ٱخۡتِلَٰفٗا كَثِيرٗا ٨٢﴾

Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an? If it had been from [any] other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction. (4:82)

Again in chapter 47 we read:[6]

﴿أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ ٱلۡقُرۡءَانَ أَمۡ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبٍ أَقۡفَالُهَآ ٢٤﴾

Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an, or are there locks upon [their] hearts? (47:24)

The phrase "reflect upon the Qur'an" which appeared in the previous verses implies making the effort to comprehend the meaning, the significance and the purpose of the verses of the Qur'an, and then implementing their teachings in one's life. By doing so, we enable the Qur'an to guide us, correct our behavior, amend our moral values, and improve the way we deal with ourselves and with others.

[6] Surat Muhammad

The above verses also stress the importance and obligation to contemplate and reflect upon the Qur’an, each one according to his or her own mental, intellectual and psychological capacity (which a Muslim should be keen to increase). In his exegesis, Ibn Kathir reported that Al-Hassan Al-Basry said, “By Allah: its contemplation is not by memorizing its words while neglecting its injunctions. Sadly, some would dare say that they have recited the entire Qur’an whereas one cannot detect any impact upon their manners or deeds.”[7]

In his commentary on the Almighty’s words “*Then do they not reflect upon the Qur'an?*” (4:82), Ibn Kathir wrote: “Allah – Most Exalted is He – commands His servants to contemplate and reflect upon the Qur’an, forbidding them from ignoring its verses or not making enough effort to understand their explicit meanings.[8] Allah’s command (to reflect upon the Qur’an) is unambiguous and when Allah – Glorified and Highly

[7] *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, volume 4, p. 34.
[8] as opposed to the allegorical meanings

Exalted is He – commands, the command should be obeyed. Therefore, contemplation is obligatory."[9]

Warning people against ignoring the contemplation of the Qur'an, the Almighty says:

﴿وَمِنۡهُمۡ أُمِّيُّونَ لَا يَعۡلَمُونَ ٱلۡكِتَـٰبَ إِلَّآ أَمَانِيَّ وَإِنۡ هُمۡ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ ٧٨﴾

And among them are unlettered ones who do not know the Scripture except in wishful thinking,[10] *but they are only assuming.* (2:78)

In his commentary on the above verse, Ibn Al-Qayyim had another interpretation of the Arabic word أماني. He wrote: "Allah has criticized those who tampered with the Scriptures[11] (2:75) as well as the "unlettered ones" who do not know of the Scripture except the *Amany* أماني, i.e., its mere recitation."[12] And there are many

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[9] *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, volume 1, p. 530.

[10] Another translation: *who know the Scripture not except from hearsay.*

[11] Books previous to the Qur'an

[12] *Amazing Points of Exegesis* (بدائع التفسير), by Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya, volume 1, p. 300.

other warnings by Muslim scholars against ignoring the contemplation of the Qur’an and only focusing on the recitation of the verses without reflecting on their meanings, objectives, lessons and teachings which we should apply in our daily lives.

Check your Priorities

To benefit from the Glorious Qur’an in our lives, we need to liberate our senses and cognitive faculties – namely, the visual sense of sight, the sense of hearing, the heart and the mind – from all that which distracts and corrupts them. Allah says in the Qur’an:

﴿وَٱللَّهُ أَخْرَجَكُم مِّنۢ بُطُونِ أُمَّهَٰتِكُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ شَيْـًٔا وَجَعَلَ
لَكُمُ ٱلسَّمْعَ وَٱلْأَبْصَٰرَ وَٱلْأَفْـِٔدَةَ ۙ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ٧٨﴾

And Allah has extracted you from the wombs of your mothers not knowing a thing, and He made for you hearing and vision and intellect[13] *that perhaps you would be grateful.* (16:78)

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[13] The original Arabic word is أفئدة which is also translated as ‘hearts.’

These senses and cognitive faculties, which Allah has blessed humans with, are the means by which we receive the verses of the Qur’an and reflect upon them. These are constantly occupied with a complex mixture of spontaneous precipitants, images, information and all that is part of Man’s cultural, social and natural environment. Since human beings are creatures of habit who tend to yield to whatever they are accustomed to, we need training to be able to detect what sort of things reach our senses and cognitive faculties, for these things shape our mindset and affect our decisions and attitudes. Unless we are selective about what we allow ourselves to see and hear, thus impacting the heart and mind, one cannot optimize the benefit from the Glorious Qur’an.

To be able to carry this out successfully, we need to stop and review our priorities in life. We should be prepared and willing to renounce arrogance, lethargy and self-deception, confronting ourselves with the truth confirmed by the following verse of the Qur’an:

﴿أَفَحَسِبۡتُمۡ أَنَّمَا خَلَقۡنَٰكُمۡ عَبَثٗا وَأَنَّكُمۡ إِلَيۡنَا لَا تُرۡجَعُونَ ١١٥﴾

Then did you think that We created you uselessly and that to Us you would not be returned? (23:115)

Spiritual Detoxification

Poisons, in the context of biology, cause disturbances to the body when a certain quantity is absorbed by the body. But there are *other* poisons which affect the mind and soul. These, when accumulated in us, cause a state of spiritual paralysis. Allah, the Almighty, says:

﴿مَن يَهۡدِ ٱللَّهُ فَهُوَ ٱلۡمُهۡتَدِيۖ وَمَن يُضۡلِلۡ فَأُوْلَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ
ٱلۡخَٰسِرُونَ ١٧٨ وَلَقَدۡ ذَرَأۡنَا لِجَهَنَّمَ كَثِيرٗا مِّنَ ٱلۡجِنِّ وَٱلۡإِنسِۖ
لَهُمۡ قُلُوبٞ لَّا يَفۡقَهُونَ بِهَا وَلَهُمۡ أَعۡيُنٞ لَّا يُبۡصِرُونَ بِهَا وَلَهُمۡ
ءَاذَانٞ لَّا يَسۡمَعُونَ بِهَآۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ كَٱلۡأَنۡعَٰمِ بَلۡ هُمۡ أَضَلُّۚ أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ
هُمُ ٱلۡغَٰفِلُونَ ١٧٩﴾

Whoever Allah guides - he is the [rightly] guided; and whoever He sends astray - it is those who are the losers. And We have certainly created for Hell many of

the jinn and mankind. They have hearts with which they do not understand, they have eyes with which they do not see, and they have ears with which they do not hear. Those are like livestock; rather, they are more astray. It is they who are the heedless. (7:178-179)

Most of these *poisons* come from using our senses in that which Allah has forbidden, for everything that Man sees or hears is stored in the subconscious, one way or another. For example, some use their visual sense of sight to look at *haram*[14] things or to look at what others have, envying them for their possessions or skills. This leads to the poisoning of one's heart and mind. When such poisons accumulate, our senses and cognitive faculties become ineffective. As a result, we become unable to comprehend the meanings of the Glorious Qur'an and benefit from its guidance.

Preventing these poisons from reaching the heart and mind can be achieved by stopping such glances and words which anger Allah – Glorified and Highly Exalted is He – in the early stages. This requires a strong will and perseverance. Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya said that

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[14] religiously forbidden

those who exercise regularly will strengthen their bodies and this applies to everything that needs to be strengthened such as our memory and mental abilities.[15] Therefore, a believer needs to exert continuous effort to improve the effectiveness of his senses and cognitive faculties gradually until he attains an insight by which he fully comprehends the signs[16] of Allah – Glorified is He.

The heart and mind are like mirrors: the more they are free from flaws, the clearer they reflect the truth. The Almighty says:

﴿إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱتَّقَوۡاْ إِذَا مَسَّهُمۡ طَٰٓئِفٞ مِّنَ ٱلشَّيۡطَٰنِ تَذَكَّرُواْ فَإِذَا هُم مُّبۡصِرُونَ ٢٠١﴾

Indeed, those who fear Allah - when an impulse touches them from Satan, they remember [Him] and at once they have insight. (7:201)

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[15] *Healing with the Medicine of the Prophet* ﷺ (الطب النبوي), by Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya.

[16] verses, teachings, messages, etc.

A *haram* glance is a poisonous arrow of Iblis[17] directed at the heart. Indeed, there is a direct link between the eye and the heart, and when the poison reaches the heart, it becomes corrupted and hardened. As a result, this heart will turn the person away from Allah and from contemplating His verses. Such a person will not benefit from the Qur'an or allow it to improve his behavior and attitude.

Get Rid of These Poisons Today

No one can take the decision to get rid of the poisons lingering in the heart and mind except you. It is a decision that requires courage and resolve. Here are some of these poisons:

- **Arrogance**

The most salient of these poisons, mentioned and warned against in the Glorious Qur'an, is arrogance. Arrogance is a sin that prevents one from listening to the truth and accepting it. One cannot comprehend the meanings, the significance and the purpose of the

[17] Satan

verses of the Qur’an – knowledge from Allah – if one disobeys Allah by being arrogant. The Almighty says:

﴿سَأَصۡرِفُ عَنۡ ءَايَٰتِيَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَتَكَبَّرُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ بِغَيۡرِ ٱلۡحَقِّ
وَإِن يَرَوۡاْ كُلَّ ءَايَةٖ لَّا يُؤۡمِنُواْ بِهَا وَإِن يَرَوۡاْ سَبِيلَ ٱلرُّشۡدِ لَا
يَتَّخِذُوهُ سَبِيلٗا وَإِن يَرَوۡاْ سَبِيلَ ٱلۡغَيِّ يَتَّخِذُوهُ سَبِيلٗاۚ ذَٰلِكَ
بِأَنَّهُمۡ كَذَّبُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِنَا وَكَانُواْ عَنۡهَا غَٰفِلِينَ ١٤٦﴾

I will turn away from My signs those who are arrogant upon the earth without right; and if they should see every sign, they will not believe in it. And if they see the way of consciousness, they will not adopt it as a way; but if they see the way of error, they will adopt it as a way. That is because they have denied Our signs and they were heedless of them. (7:146)

Therefore, turn to Allah with all your heart and ask Him to guide and help you. Do not despair because of your sins. Do not turn away for any reason, for Allah’s gates of mercy are always open.

- **Gatherings of Blasphemy and Indecency**

Attending such gatherings, even if one never utters a word in them, has serious effects on the heart and mind. The Noble Qur’an stresses the importance of staying away from gatherings of blasphemy where hypocrites and disbelievers mock the verses of Allah.[18] The Qur’an deems those who merely sit or mingle with such people in these gatherings equal to those who actively participate in them, bearing the sin with them and thus holding Man responsible for whatever he hears. In Surat An-Nisa’ (chapter 4), the Almighty says:

﴿وَقَدۡ نَزَّلَ عَلَيۡكُمۡ فِي ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ أَنۡ إِذَا سَمِعۡتُمۡ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ يُكۡفَرُ بِهَا وَيُسۡتَهۡزَأُ بِهَا فَلَا تَقۡعُدُواْ مَعَهُمۡ حَتَّىٰ يَخُوضُواْ فِي حَدِيثٍ غَيۡرِهِۦٓۚ إِنَّكُمۡ إِذٗا مِّثۡلُهُمۡۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ جَامِعُ ٱلۡمُنَٰفِقِينَ وَٱلۡكَٰفِرِينَ فِي جَهَنَّمَ جَمِيعًا ١٤٠﴾

And it has already come down to you in the Book that when you hear the verses of Allah [recited], they are denied [by them] and ridiculed; so do not sit with them

[18] This can also apply to watching such people on TV.

until they enter into another conversation. Indeed, you would then be like them. Indeed Allah will gather the hypocrites and disbelievers in Hell all together. (4:140)

- **Frequent Listening to Idle Talk**

It has already been mentioned that the Qur’an holds Man responsible for whatever he hears, thus urging him to exercise selective listening. The Qur’an praises those who choose to turn away from idle talk:

﴿... وَإِذَا مَرُّوا۟ بِٱللَّغْوِ مَرُّوا۟ كِرَامًا ٧٢﴾

...And when they pass near ill speech,[19] they pass by with dignity. (25:72)

﴿وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا۟ ٱللَّغْوَ أَعْرَضُوا۟ عَنْهُ وَقَالُوا۟ لَنَآ أَعْمَـٰلُنَا وَلَكُمْ
أَعْمَـٰلُكُمْ سَلَـٰمٌ عَلَيْكُمْ لَا نَبْتَغِى ٱلْجَـٰهِلِينَ ٥٥﴾

And when they hear ill speech, they turn away from it and say, "For us are our deeds, and for you are your deeds. Peace will be upon you; we seek not the ignorant." (28:55)

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[19] also translated as *idle talk*

Such praise implies that selective listening is an act of choice. This can be achieved by training the mind to block ‘unauthorized’ audible words, i.e., by the constant dismissal of idle talk using the conscious mind which Man controls.

- **Harmful and Vain Speech**

From a religious perspective, speech can be classified into four categories: what is clearly harmful (such as backbiting and gossip), what is totally beneficial (such as peace-making among people, inviting people to what is good and enjoining what is right), what could be both harmful and beneficial, and what is neither harmful nor beneficial but can waste a great deal of time (such as talking about food recipes and shopping). The first should be avoided; the second is good for the one who speaks as well as those who listen; the third should be filtered so that one avoids what is harmful; and the fourth should be minimized gradually. In all cases, one has to be alert and attentive to what one utters, monitoring one’s own self and holding it accountable. Any error can be immediately corrected by repentance, asking Allah for forgiveness and resolving not to repeat it.

- **Overindulgence in the World**

Following the temptations of the world without considering the consequences has led Man to be preoccupied mentally, intellectually and emotionally with matters that do not go beyond his physical needs. This preoccupation has intensified in modern life where Man is not given a chance to stop and reflect on the course of events. This has negatively affected his spiritual life, i.e., his relationship with Allah and His Book (reading it, reflecting on its verses and acting accordingly). Even in the blessed month of Ramadan when a Muslim should be focusing on his spiritual needs, one is overwhelmed by intense worldly distractions that appeal to Man's physical needs. We have to stop and think about where this is leading us. We also need to learn how to say "enough" and "no" to whatever prevents us from purifying our souls.

Take Spiritual Supplements

By spiritual supplements, I mean everything that would help Man purify his senses and cognitive faculties, leading him to a state of spiritual elevation. The Glorious Qur'an has pointed out some of the

means by which to achieve this. These include the following:

- **Frequent listening to of the Qur'an**

We should be willing and eager to attentively listen to the verses of the Noble Qur'an. Allah, the Almighty says:

﴿وَكَمۡ أَهۡلَكۡنَا قَبۡلَهُم مِّن قَرۡنٍ هُمۡ أَشَدُّ مِنۡهُم بَطۡشٗا فَنَقَّبُواْ فِي ٱلۡبِلَٰدِ هَلۡ مِن مَّحِيصٍ ٣٦ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَذِكۡرَىٰ لِمَن كَانَ لَهُۥ قَلۡبٌ أَوۡ أَلۡقَى ٱلسَّمۡعَ وَهُوَ شَهِيدٞ ٣٧﴾

And how many a generation before them did We destroy who were greater than them in [striking] power and had explored throughout the lands. Is there any place of escape? Indeed in that is a reminder for whoever has a heart or who listens while he is present [in mind]. (50:36-37)

Attentive listening to the Qur'an involves comprehending its meanings, pondering on them and responding to the verses by applying their teachings in our lives. This type of listening directs the hearts

toward Allah, Knower of the Unseen, and elevates the believer to the highest grades.

- **Observing the creation**

Many verses in the Qur'an urge Man to observe and reflect upon the creation, the universe and the history of present and past nations. The Qur'an points our attention to the important link between our visual sense of sight and our cognitive faculties (the heart and mind). In the Qur'an, we read verses that start with words like أفلا يَنظرون (*Will they not look at….?*),[20] أولَم يَروا (*Have they not observed….?*),[21] ألم تروا (*Do you not see that….?*),[22] etc. This observation is not that of mere seeing. According to the Qur'an, real blindness is not the blindness of the eye, rather that of the heart:

﴿أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونَ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ بِهَآ أَوْ ءَاذَانٌ
يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا ۖ فَإِنَّهَا لَا تَعْمَى ٱلْأَبْصَٰرُ وَلَٰكِن تَعْمَى ٱلْقُلُوبُ ٱلَّتِى
فِى ٱلصُّدُورِ ﴿٤٦﴾﴾

[20] 88:17
[21] 16:48
[22] 31:20 & 71:15

So have they not traveled through the earth and have hearts by which to reason and ears by which to hear? For indeed, it is not eyes that are blinded, but blinded are the hearts which are within the breasts. (22:46)

The eye is a window that awakens the heart to see the spots of perfection and excellence in the creation. The heart then links this visible beauty to its Creative Maker. When the heart is awakened, familiar scenes that previously never stirred one's feelings become thought-provoking. This increases insight and deep perception. The entire universe becomes a *masjid*[23] in which a believer's heart is overwhelmed with awe, glorifying the Creator – Most Exalted is He. The words of the Noble Qur'an then start to have a deeper impact on the believer; inspiring his feelings and thoughts, deeply influencing his life and effectively changing his behavior.

This observation also leads the believer to utilize the creation to serve humanity, develop the world and achieve real progress in human life.[24] The Qur'an continuously emphasizes the importance of observing

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[23] mosque or a place of worship

[24] This can be understood from verses 2:30 & 11:61.

the heavens, the earth, human beings, nations, history, etc. so that the mind is always reflecting on the creation, always searching and trying to identify the rules and laws of the universe that would help us get the most benefit from it.

Let the Qur’an Change Your Life

The Book of Allah has great power to change Man and make him successful in this life, on all levels, as well as in the Hereafter.

Resolve to do the following:

1- Always do your best.

﴿لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلاً﴾

...to test you [as to] which of you is best in deed.[25]

2- Renew your intention and determination to let the Qur’an change your life.

3- Increase the time you dedicate to the Qur’an.

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[25] Qur’an 67:2 and 11:7

4- Do not let your first goal be to finish the chapter or section you are reading. Your focus should be on how to perfect your recitation of the Noble Qur’an while reflecting on its verses and striving to apply their teachings in your life.

More tips that will help you:

- Be certain that the Qur’an is addressing you. Many people think that the Qur’an was revealed for previous people, not for us. This is what obstructs their hearts from properly understanding the Qur’an. The Qur’an addresses present and future generations as it had addressed their ancestors, for human nature does not change.[26]
- Do not rush yourself when you recite the Qur’an. Hudhayfah said, “I prayed with the Messenger of Allah ﷺ one night and he started reciting Surat al-Baqarah.[27] I thought that he would bow when he reached verse 100, but he continued. I then thought that he would perhaps recite the whole chapter in a *rak'ah*.

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[26] See *Madarij As-Salikeen* (مدارج السالكين), by Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya, volume 1, p. 343.
[27] chapter 2

On completing the chapter, I thought he would bow but he started Surat an-Nisa'[28] and recited it. Then he started Surat Al-i-'Imran[29] and recited it. He recited leisurely. Whenever a verse included praise (of Allah), he praised Him (by saying *Subhan Allah*). Whenever a verse included supplication, he asked Allah. And whenever a verse included the Lord's protection, he sought His protection."[30]

- Do not occupy your mind with negative thoughts, sorrows or worries about things that you cannot change.
- Do not let your heart focus on people or worldly things without identifying your target. You target should always be linked to success in the Hereafter.
- Train yourself to speak good or else keep silent.

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[28] chapter 4

[29] Chapter 3

[30] narrated by Muslim